

Testimony of Catherine Davis, Yahooligans!
For the Commission on Child Online Protection
On “Protective Technologies Including Filtered Search Engines & ISP’s,
Green Spaces, Monitoring & Time Limiting Systems”
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Introduction:

Thank you for the invitation to be here today to discuss Protective Technologies. Ironically, the product I am most familiar with creates a “Green Space” on the web for children not by using a new protective technology, but by old fashioned human care-giving, but I’ll explain more about that in a moment. When thinking about the issue we are addressing today of how best to keep kids safe while they are exploring the online world, there is the temptation to look for the one perfect solution that will keep all children safe all of the time. Keeping all children safe is a fantastic goal, but I believe the solution is less about hardware and software and more about providing parents, teachers and other caregivers training and choices so that they can make educated decisions on how best to keep their children safe given their unique situation. I would like to suggest that our focus should be on how best to help these adults while they teach and guide children in safe surfing situations with the goal of raising teenagers and adults who are able to make intelligent, independent decisions regarding their own online safety.

What is Yahooligans!?

Yahoo! launched Yahooligans! as a child-appropriate alternative to Yahoo! in April 1996. Many people think that Yahooligans! is simply a version of the Yahoo! directory that has been filtered, however that is not the case. Like Yahoo!, Yahooligans! hosts a comprehensive directory of web sites compiled by editors. Unlike Yahoo!, the sites listed in Yahooligans! have been reviewed and individually selected for their appropriateness, interest, and appeal to children ages 7 –12 by a special team of editors with expertise in K-12 education and child development.

The sites listed within the Yahooligans! School Bell area complement the Kindergarten – 8th grade school curriculum in the United States. There are also localized versions of Yahooligans! in Japanese and Korean. Through Yahooligans! kids are able to surf for sites on everything from *NSYNC to Pokemon, Ancient Egyptians to the current Presidential election. Prior to a web site being listed in the Yahooligans! directory every word, picture, and link on every page of every site has been reviewed by an editor. It is this “human filtering” that we believe makes Yahooligans! a product that parents and teachers trust, and that kids choose because it meets their searching needs.

The human element here is important. The benefits are most visible when you look at the ways we are able to include sites that focus on sensitive topics in the directory. A common example people use in arguments against software filters is the one where a student is doing a report on breast cancer but is unable to find any information for the report because all sites with the word “breast” are filtered out. But what about sites on WWII, or any other war? While it is appropriate for a child at this age to know something about a war, you probably wouldn’t want your 7 year old child exposed to all the facts. The same might be true about a complete pictorial of the history of the 20th century. Where even the best software may not be able to distinguish between an age-appropriate description of genocide, or even the anti-war movement of the ‘60s, a human editor can read for context as well as the appropriateness of individual words. An editor can look at the pictures, take into account the source of the site, compare what they see on the site with the school curriculum and then make a decision. While the Yahooligans! editorial team utilizes detailed criteria with which to evaluate sites, (a description is posted at: <http://help.yahoo.com/help/us/yahooligans/yahooligans-02.html>) oftentimes the decision whether to include a site comes down to our collective judgment. Would we want our nieces, nephews, or students looking at this site? Could we defend the inclusion of this site to a parent who questioned it? If we can’t easily answer “yes” to those questions, the site doesn’t get included, regardless of how compelling the site might otherwise be.

What efforts have Yahooligans! and Yahoo! made to assist Parents, Teachers & care givers ?

Yahooligans! Parents' Guide (<http://www.yahooligans.com/parents/>) and Teachers' Guide (<http://www.yahooligans.com/tg/index.html>) were created with the purpose of helping the adults who care for our young audience to make educated decisions regarding how their children and students use the Internet. The Parents' Guide, created as part of our participation with GetNetWise, includes a directory of over 100 resources for blocking & filtering technologies, browsers for kids, general & government safety sites, rating systems, privacy sites, and industry groups. The Teachers' Guide has step-by-step instructions to help educators teach Internet Literacy, evaluate web sites for use in the classroom, and establish Acceptable Use Policies in their schools. Both resources detail measures adults can take to ensure that they have structured their children's or students' internet usage in a way that is most appropriate for their particular circumstances. The safety materials are also highlighted during the Family registration process, (<http://family.yahoo.com/>), ensuring that the parents of every child under the age of 13 who registers with Yahoo! have the opportunity to read more about safety methods and technologies they can utilize in their homes. Additionally, Camp Yahoo! (<http://camp.yahoo.com>), a basic Internet training curriculum intended for newcomers to the Web, is available free of charge to members of qualified non-profit organizations, community centers, libraries, schools, and service groups. Since the introduction in April 2000 approximately 2000 people have requested Camp Yahoo! kits, and an estimated 100,000 people have gone through the training.

Recommendations/How can Government & Industry Help?:

While the current abundance of safety options might be at times overwhelming or confusing, I believe that this environment of choice is the key to offering children the safest possible Internet experiences. It is of critical importance to give parents and teachers safety alternatives as only they know what is right for their children and students. While a green space like Yahooligans! will be sufficient to keep most kids away from inappropriate content, there will be other children who will need the back up of a blocking or monitoring system. As the importance of parental involvement and decision making cannot be overstated, the government needs to encourage and support educational training programs for adults and the involvement of industry in programs such as GetNetWise. It is crucial that parents take the time to familiarize themselves with the options and make educated decisions regarding their child's Internet usage. The government should also promote and fund the development of high quality children's content.

Summary:

While there is no substitute for parental vigilance and supervision, parents need the support and training that industry and government can offer. Technology will never be a substitute for parental involvement. No technology will ever replace the guidance of a caring teacher. In the "real world" we spend time teaching children to make good decisions about even seemingly simple tasks like when and how to cross the road. Why would they need any less from us when it comes to using this new medium? Since the Internet is still relatively new it tends to be somewhat scary to many adults. We need to help educate the caregivers about the real risks and the options available to them, so that the adults in turn can help kids grow into adults who make good decisions about the use of this new medium.